

Reconciling Desire and Fear: Food as Art in *Babette's Feast*

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Introduction

The relationship between food and the diner involves the potential for a set of complex interactions that can take place during the eating of a meal. Isak Dinesen's novella, *Babette's Feast*, reveals what happens when diners eat a meal cooked by a chef who regards her food as art. Even though we cannot participate in the actual experience of eating and drinking when we read *Babette's Feast*, we are privy to the reactions of each diner as she/he embarks on a journey of discovery through the eating of food and the drinking of wine. What Dinesen provides for us is an opportunity to examine the significance of declaring food an art form and how connecting with such art-making and art consumption can profoundly change our perception of life.

The story of *Babette's Feast* provides us with an opportunity to challenge ideas pertaining to aesthetic experiences, especially the common perception that physical taste cannot lead to aesthetic appreciation and therefore food cannot qualify as a form of fine art. The arguments for and against the thesis that food is art are not the focus of the present work. Rather, in this analysis I want to consider a particular dialogue about food as art, and of the chef as the artist developing food as art. Specifically, I want to explore how when food reaches the level of art it is able to reconcile unfulfilled desires and fears by bringing together the mind, body and soul.

Babette's awareness of herself as artist, and her public declaration of her artistry, provide a window into her art. Through this window, we are given a glimpse of the mechanisms through which both food and art can function to reconcile oppositional realities and move us beyond our conceptual frameworks into a new space of possibility. I propose that the dining table in *Babette's Feast*

becomes a space where the diners come to reconcile their unfulfilled desires and fears. Through the act of eating together, the Lutherans and the General are taken beyond their conceptual limitations to a new realm of experience. If the way we know the world is predicated on how we experience it physically, affectively, and cognitively, then I suggest that the participants at Babette's meal experience an epiphany through culinary art and through the communal acts of eating and drinking.

Desire and Fear

Babette’s Feast is intended, among other things, to expose the either/or dichotomies that limit our experience, suggesting this by such contrasts as those between Paris and Berlevaag and between the Lutheran villagers and the Catholic babette. She shows how the artist is capable of reconciling such seemingly oppositional realities through the artistry of food. The story of the younger Philippa and Martine “expresses the opposition human beings experience between the desire for an ideal which [their] minds conceive and the attraction of the things of this world” (Gagne 2008, p. 2). This opposition of desire and fear **IS** directly linked to the characters’ inability to reconcile their choices in life.

Desire and fear are intimately linked when Martine and Lieutenant Loewenhielm meet. The young Loewenhielm is sent to his aunt’s house to reflect on his irresponsible behaviour. After meeting Martine in town, he is immediately attracted to her physical beauty and a subsequent vision of a “higher and purer life” (Dinesen 1993, p. 23). Loewenhielm has the gift of second-sight and until now had been unaware of the “spiritual gift in his own nature” (1993, p. 23). Hoping to declare his love to Martine, he gains entry to the Dean’s house, but just at the moment of his attempted declaration, the Lieutenant is unable to profess his feelings because he believes it will be impossible for him to live ascetically, detached from the physical world. He is defeated by his physical attraction to Martine and he leaves knowing that the spiritual world on which Martine remains focused is less compelling than the sensual one to which he returns. Lowenhielm comes away from this experience believing that “Fate is hard, and that in this

world there are things which are impossible!" (1993, p. 24). He feels he cannot have both success in his career and a life with Martine. He blames fate for his disappointment; however, it is not life that impedes his relationship with Martine, but Lowenhielm himself (Branson 2000, p. 51). Upon his return to the town where he is stationed, the Lieutenant quickly determines that he will devote his life wholeheartedly to a military career.

One year later, the great singer, Achille Papin arrives in Berlevaag. Papin is drawn to the secluded landscape of the small village, in contrast with Paris, but soon falls prey to loneliness and dark thoughts. He worries about growing old and coming to the end of his career. One day Papin hears Philippa singing in church and he is revitalized by the thought of singing with her on the stages of Paris.

Papin offers singing lessons to Philippa and secures the Dean's approval by describing how "Philippa would come to sing in church, to the glory of God" (Dinesen 1993, p. 26); however, he cannot withhold his dream from Philippa and tells her of his desire to sing with her in Paris. For the first time in her life, Philippa is presented with an alternative to the ascetic existence she knows so well and keeps the desire of becoming a singer to herself. In the meantime, Papin gives her the role of Zerlina from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* to study. During a lesson, Papin and Philippa perform the seduction scene from *Don Giovanni* and Philippa experiences a moment of doubt as to what is her true calling when Papin is "swept off his feet by the heavenly music" (1993, p. 28) and kisses her. Lost in the moment of artistic creation, Papin is driven to actions that he is not fully aware of nor can fully recall. Philippa, however, is "surprised and even frightened by something in her own nature" (1993, p.28). The physical and emotional arousal that she experiences threatens her spiritual contentment. She quits her musical training, "all too aware of the fine line between art and life that pleasure can cross" (Korsmeyer 1999, 204).

Achille Papin, on the other hand, understands the fate of the artist; in fact, he is the only other artist in the story besides Babette. He reflects, "I have lost my life for a kiss. . . Don Giovanni kissed Zerlina, and Achille Papin pays for it!"

(Dinesen 1993, p. 28). Achille understands truths about the human condition, and how to communicate these truths to his audience, if they are prepared to receive them. He also understands that to pursue art wholeheartedly is to be true to one's self as an artist. His assumption is that while art imitates life it is not *necessarily* life. For a woman like Philippa, who has committed herself to life of asceticism, Achille represents the sinful pleasure of the emotions. He perceives the aesthetic in the music through the full use of his senses and the resulting emotional response. Philippa fears the opportunity to realize this form of experience; she maintains a naïve adherence to her spiritual principles through fear and rejection rather than an understanding of the complexity of human nature. She therefore rejects the calling of the artist in favour of her religious work.

Papin leaves Berlevaag with the same fears that plagued him earlier—The fear of rejection and anonymity. His desire also remains the same, which is “to do my utmost!” (1993, p. 59). Babette echoes this Artistic desire when she recalls Papin's words when explaining her decision to stay in Berlevaag after having spent all her money on the eponymous feast. “It is terrible and unbearable to an artist . . . to be encouraged to do, to be applauded for doing, his second best” (1993, p. 59). The desire to do one's best and be recognized for it is something that resonates within Babette. In fact, both Papin and Babette long for the Paris they once knew where their art was appreciated and admired. The pre-1870 Paris represents a place of satisfied desires and more specifically a place where artistic desires can be fulfilled. Paris offers both singer and chef access to the materials, contexts and audiences necessary to undertake great art. It is a culinary paradise where a chef can procure practically any foodstuff; diners and audiences are sophisticated, knowledgeable and rich.

The irony in *Babette's Feast* is that the people best suited to appreciate Papin's and Babette's artistry are those associated with corruption and cruelty. And at least in the case of the historically real General Gallifet, they are capable of extreme brutality and murder (it is the General who killed Babette's husband and son). The Paris Commune uprising results in the collapse of the society that

once celebrated Papin and Babette. The desire to create remains but the conditions for recognition of great art are no longer available to either Papin or Babette as the Paris they once knew no longer exists.

Food as Art

There is a long history of disagreement over the question of whether food can be art. Western philosophers have long denied aesthetic legitimacy to taste (that is, the taste of the tongue). Critics claim that food is unsuitable for evaluation as an art object. The notion is that the body taints the object with its subjectivity. Since food is a substance that we ingest, we cannot remain objective about it, and therefore are not capable of evaluating it aesthetically.

Carolyn Korsmeyer proposes that a philosophy of physical taste *can* be developed and that to do so is to challenge the low standing of taste in the hierarchy of the senses. Using Nelson Goodman's *Language of Art*, Korsmeyer argues for the "aesthetic potential of food as a fecund symbolic system where it can denote, represent, and exemplify a whole range of expressions, just like any other art form" (Ray 2007, p. 57). She states that her intention is "not to slight the pleasure of eating but to pull sensation and sense pleasure more fully into the purview of aesthetics by claiming that the pleasure they deliver is often an enhancement or even a component of their cognitive significance" (Ray 2007, p. 7). More recently, Julian Baggini supports this view and suggests that "experience is never simply something that goes on inside our brains, nor is a physical experience unaffected by what we think and believe" (Baggini 2014, p. 213) rather it is a linking of the two.

Korsmeyer suggests that much of what we eat functions as representation. She insists that food means more than itself and is dependent on the ceremonial or personal or cultural narratives to which it is linked. The link she makes to food as art is that food on its own is assessed only for a relatively narrow band of exemplified properties; art is assessed for all symbolic functions. To determine that food is art, it must be assessed in the context in which it is produced and eaten. To extract it means to detach it from the symbolic functions it possesses.

Hervé This and Pierre Gagnaire extend this concept of food as art in their work *Cooking: The Quintessential Art*. They come to an agreement that the language of cooking is a dialectic between the chef and the diner and as such attempts to engage the diner's sensory, emotional and intellectual faculties within a particular context. Similarly, the chef Ferran Adrià claims, "a dish can satisfy a physiological need or provide pleasure for the senses, but it can also 'say' something that stimulates analysis and reflection and provokes a deeper response. Food comes closest to art when there is a desire to engage the diner in this way" (Adria 2008, insert on Cooking and Art). These perspectives help explicate the aesthetic response of the diners at Babette's feast. Babette claims that her culinary production is art and the emphasis in the novella is on how tasting in a particular circumstance and eating specific food items can lead to a transformative aesthetic experience. In presenting us with Babette, who is the example of chef as artist, Dinesen's story answers the question of whether food and its accompanying tastes can count as fine art. Can food produce the kind of emotional response or insight we expect from an encounter with an aesthetic object? From the text, we would expect Dinesen herself to reply with an emphatic "Yes!" At the same time, since Babette declares herself an artist, Dinesen does not require us to agree. She needs us only to recognize that both food and fine art as symbolic systems share similar components.

In her declaration, Babette speaks at length for the first time. She expresses her loathing for the evil that was committed during the Commune and the subsequent repression. At the same time, she confesses that she still longs for the people who committed these evils, as they are the ones who have been trained to appreciate her artistry and her talent for making them happy. What she desires is absolute freedom to practice her art. Babette points out that Achille Papin understood that an artist "requires the leave to do [her/his] utmost" (1973, p.59), and she acknowledges that the spirit of the artist is undermined by compromise. Art demands Truth. For Babette, the truth of her status as an artist is demonstrated by the fact that she created the meal without any expectation of the diners being able to comprehend what she had accomplished. An artist's destiny is to willingly

submit to his or her role as an artist, without placing limitations on what that appointed role may be.

Reconciliation

The narrative recounting of Martine's and Philippa's memories from the past prepares us for the reconciliation that occurs during the feast. Neither Martine nor Philippa sits at the dinner table completely ignorant of the sensual appreciation of life. They have each been touched by it as young women and, in accordance with their vocation as helpmates to their father, they have rejected the physical world for the ascetic world of spiritual contemplation and good works. Martine and Philippa have fostered a lifetime of well-developed spiritual habits and, thus are predisposed (but unprepared) for a spiritual discovery when they attend the feast. Their reconciliation with the sensual world is contrasted with Loewenhielm's reaction to the dinner.

Now a General, Loewenhielm returns to Berlevaag after an eighteen-year absence, yearning for a glimpse of the life he rejected as a young man. For Martine, Philippa, and the General, the revelation at the feast reconciles the path, or calling, he or she has chosen. For the sisters, the irony is that a sense of union with the divine is ultimately achieved not through spiritual practice, but through the sensual experience of eating and drinking. In a parallel way, the General arrives at spiritual revelation through a brief—but profound and intense—aesthetic experience grounded in sensuality.

Dinesen is spare in her description of the diners' response to the meal; there is sensory reaction, but it is understated. The General exclaims at the variety and sophistication of dishes laid before him, but the Lutherans are apparently unmoved by his exclamations of delight—although not so far removed that they can ignore them. Though they refuse to remark themselves on the beauty of the presentation and the exoticism of foodstuffs, they are not impervious to the collective spirit, which is dominated by the General's effusive appreciation of the food. The Lutherans notice that they do not feel the familiar heaviness of meals as

experienced in the past. In the characteristic fashion of French haute cuisine, this meal makes them feel "lighter in weight and lighter of heart" (Dinesen 1993, p. 50). As a result, they stop reminding themselves of their vow not to taste. Indeed, they begin to frame the experience quite differently, recollecting "when man has firmly renounced all ideas of food and drink . . . he eats and drinks in the right spirit" (1993, p. 50). Even though Martine and Philippa are entirely ignorant of the magnificence and artistry behind the food experience—for example, the complexity of the turtle soup, and superbness of the Amontillado—they cannot help but be affected by the physicality of eating, and they begin to enter into the sensual pleasure that accompanies the food. In this way, through their experience of food and the sense of taste, the sisters finally "encounter the divine spirit (through their bodies) and they [see] the universe as it really is" (1993, p. 54). The fear of relinquishing one's self to physical desire and enjoyment is completely eradicated in a blissful moment of wholeness. The body knows something the mind does not, and it is through the physical consumption of the food and drink that the sisters and the congregants are moved to revise their way of knowing the world, such that their criteria for, and conception of, truth is altered.

Where the sisters discover the sensual pleasure of life through the meal, the General discovers a spiritual mystery and meaning previously absent from his life. The General returns to Berlevaag hoping to reconcile the choice he made as a youth—he "had been scared of the Huldre of the family legend and he had . . . refused the gift of second sight" (1993, p. 46). Now as an old man, the General longs for the "faculty of second sight" (1993, p. 46). Thus, he enters the sisters' home determined to prove that he had made the right choice back in his youth.

General Lowenhielm embodies the aesthetic experience achieved through understanding the complexity of the food and the meaning attached to it. He is part of the royal court, and thus represents the social values of the aristocracy. As Babette's meal begins, General Lowenhielm is immediately struck, even made suspicious, by the quality of the wine in his glass. A reflective moment occurs here, as the General equates such fine liquor with the world he has left behind at

the Royal Court. After a pause, "in order to test his senses" (1993, p. 48), he tentatively tastes the turtle soup, and again expresses amazement at the fine execution of the dish. We see that the General *feels* a queer sense of panic at such dishes appearing in this incongruous context. He is unused to experiencing this level of cuisine in the courts and elite cafés of Paris surrounded by people with sophisticated palates, not amongst a religious community with an aesthetic of sensual self-denial. I think it is significant that, even though the General is puzzled at the incongruence of such fine food in such a setting, he does not rise from the dining table and seek out the chef. The social boundaries remain intact at the meal; the chef works away hidden in the kitchen and the diner has knowledge only of what is placed before him or her.

As Babette's signature dish of *Cailles en Sarcophage*¹ is presented to him, General Lowenhielm recalls a friend who once described Babette as a culinary genius. He remembers that this particular dish signified the "love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety" (1993, p. 51). And in fact, as soon as he eats, the spiritual understanding that the General has long been searching for arrives, as an awareness of the Grace that pervades the dinner: "See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us" (1993, p. 52).

With this revelation, the General finally comes to understand what the Dean proclaimed thirty years ago—"anything is possible" (1993, p. 54). If we apply a Lutheran interpretation to his speech, the General receives a spiritual epiphany through the giving and receiving of grace. The recipient has only to wait in faith to receive the Grace bestowed by God. However, again, Dinesen includes an ironic tone in this speech that invites us to a reading that offers more insight into the role of the chef as artist. The General's speech concerns the mystery in being granted that which we have refused. As Robert Langbaum suggests in his

¹ This dish consists of stuffed quails perched in a "tomb" of puff pastry presented with a wine sauce.

book, *The Gayety of Vision. A Study of Isak Dinesen's Art*, life is not an either/or situation. Langbaum suggests that Dinesen is commenting on the inadequacy both of placing emphasis on a life that seeks advantage in this world, and on that which seeks advantage in the next (Langbaum 1964, p. 253). If this is so, then Dinesen seems to be recommending an imaginative apprehension of life, one which links the magical world of the artist (as represented by Achille Papin and Babette) with the mystical vision of the Dean, uniting them into a single, integrated apprehension. Lowenhielm believed he had rejected the mystic within him by pursuing a life of material success, but at this moment he realizes that the worlds of faith and the life he has led are inextricably intertwined. For the General, the dichotomy is resolved, and he is finally freed from his long-standing belief that he must choose either material or spiritual. The oppositional forces of sensuality/spirituality, body/spirit, pagan/religious, aesthetic/ascetic, and epiphany/sin are brought together.

At the end of the meal, Lowenhielm is finally capable of making his declaration to Martine that "anything in this world is possible" (Dinesen 1993, p. 54). Upon his leave-taking, the General realizes that he has never been separated from Martine, nor will he be in the future, for they share a spiritual link that prevails over the need to meet in the flesh. Martine agrees with General Lowenhielm that indeed anything *is* possible in this world.

But is it really? Babette has sacrificed all that she has to create a Café Anglais meal in Berlevaag. There will be no other such feast. The General has been pleasantly surprised by the meal and genuinely recognizes its worth; however, he is not aware of the punishing cost to Babette of such artistry (Branson 2000, p. 51). The infinite grace to which the General refers in his speech is actually a direct result of Babette's generosity. And yet the generosity is in an important way driven by self-interest: Babette creates the feast for her own sake, since without the possibility of creating art the artist goes unfulfilled. It is a very interesting portrayal on Dinesen's part that an act so essentially self-centred can result in a gift of exquisite awareness for the guests, such that "time itself

[merges] into eternity" (Dinesen 1993, p. 53). This is indeed grace, and it is the by-product of the artist's devotion to calling.

When Philippa suggests at the end of the story that Babette should not have spent all her money for the Lutherans' sake, Babette replies, rather scornfully, that she did not prepare the feast for them; she did it for herself. There is a paradox in this declaration. Although she has not sacrificed her person for the diners, she has still sacrificed her capacity to practice her art in the future. Without economic resources, Babette will be incapable of practicing the French haute cuisine that is her art form. This makes Babette's gift of the feast seem almost an irresponsible action: we might have the impression that Babette has completely sacrificed herself to her art. I do not think this is the case. Babette is not a martyr to her art; rather, she is true to her identity as an artist. She finds meaning and contentment through her choice to sacrifice everything for one last artistic creation. Babette points out that even Philippa's former music coach understands that an artist "requires the leave to do [her/his] utmost" (1993, p. 59), and she acknowledges that the spirit of the artist is undermined by compromise.

Babette pities the sisters' lack of knowledge because they haven't been awakened to the Truth, as she knows it; that is, Art demands Truth. For Babette, the truth of her status as an artist is demonstrated by the fact that she created the meal without any expectation of the diners being able to comprehend what she had accomplished. An artist's destiny is to willingly submit to his or her role as an artist, without placing limitations on what that appointed role may be. One wonders whether Babette will be able to sustain her connection to the creative without material resources, or whether her impoverishment (with its independence from the aristocracy) could actually afford her an opportunity to discover another form of artistic endeavour. On the one hand, the art-making Babette has known is ending; on the other, she has a new-found freedom. I like to think that Babette's rigidity against Philippa's embrace at the end represents a determination to remain true to her calling as an artist, and holds out hope that she will discover a new mode of artistic expression.

Conclusion

The strength of *Babette’s Feast* lies in its depth and richness: it is capable of sustaining multiple interpretations and multiple layers of meanings, mimicking in this way the depth and richness of our experience of the world. The dinner that Babette has prepared so meticulously thus becomes a metaphor for any creative act that allows for a variety of multiple reactions and interpretations. Each guest individually enters a space that gives him or her the possibility to know the world in a unique way. During this process Babette herself does not prescribe ways to interpret her work; her generosity allows each guest the freedom to react in an individual manner and in effect makes it possible for them to act as co-creators. And we come to understand that culinary art *can* lead to fulfilment and reconciliation of the circumstances of life.

Dinesen also provides us with a *language* with which to discuss food as art. We can use the aesthetic experience that Babette creates to inform how we might discuss the function of culinary art. And the transformative effect of the feast on the diners provides us with the opportunity to examine how “dishes and techniques [might] engage [diners’] sensory, emotional and intellectual faculties to the full [and thus] encourage them to experience food in new and unexpected ways” (Adrià 2008, insert on Creative Methods 1). Babette’s art is bodily art in that we must ingest it to experience the full effects of the creative product. It is a completely subjective form of art that brings us back into ourselves and taps into our awareness of our humanity. “Fine food is about the aesthetic of the imminent, not the transcendent” (Baggini 2014, p. 226).

Unlike the two sisters who have been unable to feel fully alive in the ascetic world of their choice, Babette creates an aesthetic experience that is potentially transformative, but only if the recipients can receive it as such. This is, of course, true of all art: the aesthetic experience of the audience depends essentially on the nature of the individual response to it.

We must keep in mind that Dinesen intended *Babette’s Feast* to be read as a comedy, but it is a tribute to Dinesen’s artistry that such a wealth of interpretation is available within the story. That a religious sect could encounter grace through

eating and drinking, and still be unaware that they have been "exalted by their own merit" (1993, p. 53), is comedic. At the same time, the revelation of food as art, and the powerful aesthetic transformation we see in the diners moves beyond comedy. In *Babette's Feast*, Dinesen makes us see that grace is available to us from all corners—from the sublime to the ridiculous. The novella Dinesen offers us is as rich as the foodstuffs in the artist's feast itself.

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